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Food Retailing in Vienna

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter:

Viennese food markets are delightful for a sausage lover but painful for someone who loves convenience. Vienna has many small food stores that have traditionally specialized in meat, bread, or produce, but here as elsewhere the American-type supermarket is taking over. Like its American counterpart, the Viennese supermarket has a wide selection of foods, with as many as 10,000 items on the shelves, but there is little attention paid to convenience. This is surprising, since a larger proportion of Austrian women are in the labor force and have little time and energy for shopping. Two of the most inconvenient features of Austrian food stores are the closing hours and the checkout counters.

Every food store in Austria closes promptly at noon on Saturday and at 6:00 P.M. on weekdays. Austrians, of course, have been trained from birth to shop early and often: thus, as one Austrian consumer economist points out, "the only class of shoppers seriously disadvantaged are those recently arrived from America." In addition most food stores close for lunch, usually from noon to 3:00 P.M. on weekdays. The reason for these closing hours is not obvious. Tradition may influence the behavior of small and family operated stores, but it's hard to see why large supermarkets requiring large volumes of business to cover overheads should choose to limit their hours so severely. Further investigation reveals that it's a law, Regulation B, which specifies these closing hours. So far a coalition of the store clerks' union and the owners of small stores has prevented attempts to repeal Regulation B. The union consists mostly of women who want to be with their families in the evenings and on the weekends, and the owners of small stores don't want to compete with supermarkets 24 hours a day.

The checkout counters are another annoyance. Checking out with a full cart of groceries is a game to challenge your

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stamina and reflexes. While the cashier sits gathering strength, you stack all your groceries on the short stretch of counter next to the register. The counter ends abruptly at the cashier's elbow. At the sound of the bell you move your cart under the lip of the counter, and the cashier springs into action. Your task is to catch in midair each item as she deftly flicks it over the edge. A pulverized tomato or split package of pork chops counts as a successful shot on goal. There's no time to bag your groceries, so when everything is back in the cart you pay your bill and look for a quiet spot to do your bagging and boxing.

This checkout system, where the customer supplies the labor as well as the containers, has evolved partly because there is little low wage labor available for bagging and checking. The cost of containers, especially paper bags, is also high, and this encourages the customer to use plastic bags or provide his own container. One favorable ecological consequence of the system is that Austria consumes only one-third as much paper as the United States.

Despite the checkout inconvenience many Viennese prefer to make a weekly shopping trip to the supermarket rather than every day trips to smaller stores. They can easily do so. Vienna has two large supermarket chains, with more than 100 stores each, two medium size chains, and several chains that operate ten or fewer stores each. One of the largest and best known is the Julius Meinl chain, which began as a tea and coffee importer in the middle of the nineteenth century. Meinl has strong ties in the central city and carries a large proportion of specialty items. The other major chain is Konsum, which is a consumer cooperative. Such cooperatives have traditionally been strong in Austria, and Konsum seems to be thriving. Konsum and Billa, one of the two medium-size chains, have been especially aggressive in branching out into the suburbs, and therefore have some of the larger stores. One Konsum store on the south side of Vienna sells everything from Kiwi fruit to television sets out of a single enormous building.

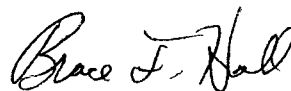
In these suburban supermarkets, the floor space is relatively unrestricted and store layout, aisles and shelves are similar to American supermarkets. Here, as there, the amount of shelf space allocated to types of foods is a good indicator of food preferences. Roughly 5-7% of the shelf space in a store here is devoted to meats, less than the proportion found in an American supermarket, and the types of meats are very different. One half of the meat counter is devoted to prepared meats including sausage, salami, ham, head cheese, and the like, better known here as Wurst. Among the fresh meats, pork and organ meats are much more prominent. Statistics support these observations. While Austrians consume only two-thirds as much meat as do Americans, they do consume much more of that

meat in the form of pork and prepared meats. The statistics don't indicate quality differences, but they are readily apparent. The pork is fine and delicate, and the pork products are savory, but the beef though tender is likely from dairy herd culls rather than fattened beef cattle.

More than 10% of the shelf space is devoted to candies, so it's not surprising that sugar consumption is high--over 100 kg. per capita. It's about the same as U.S. sugar consumption, but they take their sugar here straight rather than diluted in soft drinks. Canned and frozen foods occupy a relatively small proportion of the stores here, but more space is given to wines and liquors, which take up about 10% of total shelf space. The quality of fruits and vegetables is high, as most are imported, oranges from Spain, avocados from Israel, lettuce from Holland, tomatoes from Hungary, even occasionally peaches from South Africa. The total amount of space allocated to fruits and vegetables is less than in the U.S., reflecting the slightly lower per capita consumption in Austria.

The mix of foods sold in the stores, the hours of food store operation, and the checkout procedures will probably not change much in the near future. Dietary preferences will be especially slow to change in Austria, where the proportion of people over age 65 is among the world's highest. Although Austrians are becoming aware that there may be too much pork and sugar in their diet, this awareness is building slowly. Consumer information programs here have not focussed on food-related health concerns. Nor have advertisers and food manufacturers begun to emphasize "light" low-sugar and low-fat foods. The very high rates of heart disease and cancer deaths do indicate that there is some cause for concern about the diet.

Sincerely,



Bruce F. Hall

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